

Domestic Violence, Mental Health and Substance Abuse

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Why does domestic violence (DV) have so many mental health effects?

Put yourself in the victim's place.

You live with a partner who...

- Believes he or she owns you.
- Hurts and exploits you.
- Confuses you.
- Disrespects and degrades you.
- Destroys your self-esteem.
- Blames you for everything – including his or her own behavior.
- Threatens your loved ones.

You live with a partner who...

- Isolates you.
- Destroys your parenting, your relationships and your career.
- Robs you of your autonomy.
- Restricts your options and dictates your choices.
- Robs you of control over your own life.
- Stalks you.
- Keeps you on edge.

Why DV has so many effects on mental health

- It's intentional.
- It's hard to recognize, because:
 - It's so pervasive
 - Individual events can be explained away.
 - It's perpetrated by someone you've chosen.
 - It's perpetrated by someone who has intimate access to you.
 - Sometimes your partner is nice to you.

Why DV has so many effects on mental health

- You are constantly under threat.
- Self-blame, plus blame by others, plus your partner's manipulation makes it hard to think straight about his or her behavior.
- All the choices available to you carry risks and may not seem like real choices.

To survive, you must...

- Placate and appease your partner.
- Walk on eggshells.
- Comply with his or her unreasonable demands.
- Pay close attention his or her mood, and ignore your own needs.
- Shut up.
- Hide what is happening to you.
- Try to protect yourself and your kids.

To survive, you might...

- Deny or minimize incidents.
- Ignore patterns.
- Numb yourself with drugs or alcohol.
- Tolerate however he or she acts.
- Denigrate yourself.
- Convince yourself that you can cope.
- Stay with your partner.
- Try to escape, temporarily or permanently.

If you leave, you have to cope with...

- Increased abuse and stalking.
- How your ex treats your children.
- The possibility of losing your children.
- Unemployment and poverty.
- Increased risk of death.
- PLUS...other people's expectation that leaving will solve everything!

The Mental Health Aftermath

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- Depression.
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts.
- Anxiety disorders.
- "Battered" self-esteem.
- Substance abuse.

Mental Health Symptoms

- May be a response to danger and entrapment.
- May be used as an excuse by the abuser.
- May be exacerbated by abuse.
- May isolate you and make you unable to work.
- May get worse if your partner controls your access to medication or treatment.
- May be related to traumatic brain injury (TBI).

PTSD – What It Looks Like

- Physiological arousal
 - You are jumpy, easily startled and hypervigilant.
 - You can't concentrate, sleep or work.
- Re-experiencing the trauma
 - You have intrusive memories, flashbacks and nightmares.
- Numbness and avoidance
 - You withdraw from people and lose interest in activities.
 - You may feel alternately numb and aroused.

Depression – What It Looks Like

- You feel sad, worthless, guilty and hopeless.
- You lose interest in things you care about.
- You eat or sleep more or less than usual.
- You feel fatigued and have no energy.
- You can't concentrate or make decisions.
- You may think about suicide.

TBI – What It Looks Like

- You struggle with fatigue and insomnia.
- You easily get confused and frustrated.
- You may act impulsively and can't anticipate the outcomes of your actions.
- You have trouble remembering, focusing, solving problems, taking initiative and coping with change.
- You may have PTSD or depression, or begin using substances.
- You may not recognize your problems.

Substance Use

- You may be self-medicating to ease your physical and emotional pain.
- Others take you less seriously than they would if you were sober.
- People look down on you as a victim and as a substance user – especially if you are a mother.
- You may be denied shelter.
- Safety planning becomes harder.

Substance use may give the abuser more ways to control you

- Sabotaging your recovery, by
 - Making it unsafe to comply with treatment plans.
 - Forcing you to continue using.
 - Endangering your children while you're in treatment.
- Forcing you into crime or prostitution.
- Using your substance abuse to excuse his or her abuse, discredit you, or take away your children.

Put your advocate hat back on.

What can you do?

- Ask about mental health, substance abuse and TBI issues at intake.
- Look for the person behind the symptoms.
- Help victims recognize their symptoms as responses to abuse.
- Provide support – especially crucial with depression.
- Recognize that “symptoms” may actually be survival strategies.

What can you do?

- Refer for mental health, substance abuse, or TBI help.
- Help victims evaluate the services they receive.
- Include in safety planning:
 - Treatment compliance.
 - Filling prescriptions and taking medication.
 - How her or his symptoms affect her or his ability to deal with the violence.
 - How partner's behavior affects her or his symptoms.

What can you do?

- Help victims educate their attorney and therapist about DV.
- Talk about what will happen in court.
- Help victims prepare to:
 - Recount traumatic events – in front of the abuser.
 - See their abusive partner in court.
 - Have people misinterpret their symptoms and see them as worse off than they really are.
 - Watch the abuser effectively manipulate and lie to the court.

Abusers' Manipulations

- I'm just trying to.....good-sounding, but phony, motive.
- *I'm* the victim here!
- I'm not the one with the problem.
- She's crazy, delusional, drunk...etc.
- Speaks to the victim under the guise of addressing the court.
- Threatening body language.
- Preemptively seeks treatment to make him/herself look good to the court.

Things to Remember

- Mental health symptoms caused by abuse may diminish with safety.
- Support really does help.
- Victim's sobriety will not end partner's abuse.
- Renewed victimization or the stress of shelter living can trigger relapse.
- Victims are the experts on their own experience
- Victim's behavior is often reasonable given their situation.
- Leaving doesn't solve everything.

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